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SUBJECT: IVANOV'S ARMENIA VISIT: STUMPING FOR SARGSIAN?

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SUMMARY

¶1. (U) Russian First Deputy Prime Minister Sergey Ivanov's visit to Yerevan April 10-11 generated many of the routine media reports about economic cooperation and and Armenia's views on NATO that typically follow Russian visits to Armenia. Ivanov's meetings with new Prime Minister Serzh Sargsian also served as implicit approval of Sargsian's widely anticipated election to the presidency in 2008, and gave Sargsian a chance to assure Moscow publicly that he is loyal. END SUMMARY.

RUSSIAN SUPPORT IS IN THE BAG

¶2. (U) During the two former defense ministers' joint April 11 news conference, Ivanov took pains to tout his good "personal relations" with Sargsian ("Serzh Azatovich and I have known each other for a long time ...") and to note that they were able to "discuss many issues in a straightforward and frank manner." Ivanov's warm words for Sargsian came shortly after Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's visit to Armenia, during which he confirmed Russian media speculation that the Kremlin approves of Sargsian's anticipated election in 2008. "The official position of Russia coincides with the unofficial position of Russia," Lavrov said.

SARGSIAN SHOWS HIS LOYALTY

¶3. (U) In response to a journalist's question about Russian parliament speaker Boris Gрызlov's 2005 characterization of Armenia as "Russia's outpost," Ivanov called Armenia "Russia's strategic partner." Sargsian came to Gрызlov's defense as well, saying the remark had been misunderstood by the media.

¶4. (U) Had there been any doubt about Sargsian's geopolitical leanings, he put them to rest during the joint press conference, noting that the theoretical deployment of NATO bases in the Caucasus would result in "new dividing lines," and would not improve regional security. Sargsian also sent a message to Georgia when he said that the reduction in Russian military presence in the region must not lead to the military expansion of any other country or organization. Ivanov noted that Russian military presence in Armenia is not

a threat to "third countries," but ensures Russian and Armenian security.

¶15. (SBU) COMMENT: Though Sargsian spent Ivanov's visit assuring and reassuring Russia of his loyalty, Armenia's foreign policy of "complementarity" is not lost on him. He commented during an April 9 interview to the Financial Times, "We want to become part of the European family," and expressed Armenia's desire to join the EU, but noted it had no desire to join NATO. His statements appeared clearly targeted to the newspaper's western audience. In general, Sargsian's new post as prime minister has given him ample opportunity to discuss broad government policy in the press, a benefit of which he is taking full advantage, his eye presumably on the 2008 prize.
GODFREY